Automatic and Effortful Processes in Socially Desirable Responding: a Cross-Cultural View

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Abstract

In this paper we develop a theory to account for differences in Socially Desirable Responding (SDR) across cultures. Specifically, we deal with differences in the mechanism through which individuals from different cultures engage in the form of SDR/Impression Management (IM) in attitude questions. Based on a distinct definition of attitude in Eastern cultures and on the notion that collectivists are engaged at correcting for situational factors, we argue that collectivists engage in IM through an automatic process. Individualists’ IM, on the other hand, is more effortful. Implications and directions for future investigation are discussed.

Introduction

This paper deals with the process through which people from different cultures engage in socially desirable responding (SDR) for impression management (IM). Despite the existing knowledge about cultural differences in people’s tendency for SDR (e.g., van Hemert, van de Vijver, Poortinga, and Georgas 2002), researchers are not clear about the underlying mechanism for SDR (Johnson and van de Vijver 2002). We argue that for those with an individualistic cultural background or context SDR takes place through a deliberate or effortful process, whereas for those with a collectivistic cultural background or context it is more spontaneous or automatic. Next we present the theoretical background and develop our propositions. Then we discuss implications and directions for future investigation.

Theoretical Background and Conceptual Development

Research suggests that collectivists are more likely to engage in SDR compared to individualists (e.g., Triandis et al. 2001; van Hemert et al. 2002). The reasoning for this is that collectivists conform in order to maintain good relationships. In contrast, individualists value uniqueness and social independence, and thus are less likely to conform (Triandis 1995). Further, according to Lalwani, Shavitt, and Johnson (2006), individualists see their responses as means for self-enhancement, but collectivists see them as means for IM.

Focusing on responses to attitude questions in survey settings, we address cultural differences in the underlying mechanisms of SDR/IM. Research on attitude measurement suggests that there may be cultural differences in the attitude construct. According to cultural researchers, collectivists are more comfortable with contradictory propositions than Individualists (Aaker and Sengupta 2000, Wong, Rindfleisch, and Burroughs 2003). Further, research conducted in western societies proposes that attitude consists of different dimensions (cognitive, affective, and behavioral), and that these dimensions will often be, at least to some extent, consistent with one other. Inconsistencies will lead to weaker or less stable attitudes (Festinger 1957; Breckler 1984; Cacioppo, Petty, and Geen 1989; Chaiken and Yates 1985). However, given that collectivists are comfortable with contradictory propositions, it would be reasonable to expect that in the East there is less pressure to bring components of attitude toward internal consistency. Moreover, definitions of attitude imply an enduring disposition. However, if collectivists are comfortable with contradictions between the different components at a given time, then they might also feel comfortable with contradictions between the same component at different times.

If collectivists are indeed more prone to expressing different attitudes in different situations, then the case of SDR can be viewed as a special case for this tendency. We argue that collectivists are more likely to engage in SDR in response to attitude questions because they make situational corrections. Individualists are less likely to make those situational corrections and thus are less likely to engage in SDR. This notion of situational correction in response to attitude questions is equivalent to the situational correction in attribution, that it is more prevalent in collectivists (relative to individualists, who make more dispositional attributions in social judgment) (Morris and Peng 1994).

How do these situational corrections take place? The possibility that variations in expressed attitudes of collectivists are due to different characteristics of attitude (more complex, situational dependent, and less enduring relative to attitudes of individualists), implies that differences in expressed social attitudes will occur spontaneously without need for deliberate editing and processing. This idea is also in line with recent research by Knowles et al. (2001) that claims that collectivists’ correction for situational factors in making attributions takes place automatically. These researchers maintain that because this correction has been practiced frequently in collectivists it has become “automated”, and thus does not require substantial cognitive resources.

Whereas with regard to collectivists it is possible to claim automatic situational correction, the case with individualists is different. Based on the Western view, an attitude refers to an enduring disposition. Thus, all else being equal, people’s actual attitude (unless changed) should still similar across situations. What can change, though, is the expressed attitude. Adjustments in the expressed attitude may take place when one wishes to engage in IM using SDR. To be able to make this adjustment, however, one should invest cognitive resources in order to edit one’s response. This implies an effortful process (Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull 1998). Thus, we propose:

P1: When collectivists engage in SDR/IM in responding to attitude questions, they do it automatically without investing substantial cognitive resources.

P2: When individualists engage in SDR for IM in attitude questions, they do it through a more effortful process.

Discussion

This perspective has theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically it contributes to an understanding of the processes through which people respond to surveys, and particularly to sensitive survey questions. Further, this research contributes to the understanding of cultural differences in the construct of attitudes. The idea that there are differences in the construct of attitude across culture is new. Insight into this notion may open a new stream of research into the differences between cultures, not only in terms of cognitive processes but also in terms of understanding concepts such as attitudes and emotions.

Practically, this research contributes to understanding the conditions in which SDR is more likely to occur. Insights into the role of culture in SDR may improve our ability to assess the validity of cross-cultural comparisons based on survey data.